

# GREECE 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship, with some restrictions. It recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish Community of Greece, and the Muslim Minority of Thrace have long-held status as official, religious, public-law legal entities. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups, and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches hold religious legal entity status under a 2014 law. Other religious groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientologists, and Baha’is, have civil association legal status.

In May, an Athens court sentenced a defrocked monk to a one-year suspended prison sentence for inciting violence against Jews. In February, an Athens court sentenced two human rights activists to a 12-months suspended prison sentence for having falsely accused a Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of racist and antisemitic hate speech. In August, parliament amended the process under which the government appoints muftis in Thrace. Turkish-speaking members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace said members of the faith should elect their own leaders without government interference. The government granted permits for the establishment of six new houses of prayer operated by a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses, an Old Calendarist group, and four Pentecostal groups. The government revoked the permits of five houses of prayer, four administered by Pentecostals and one run by a Muslim group. In March, a municipality in Thrace indefinitely suspended work on a proposed amusement park when workers discovered the site was a 17th-century Islamic cemetery. In June, the government inaugurated a *cemevi* (Alevi Muslim house of worship) in Evros, near Turkey. In March, the government withdrew a proposal to allow kosher and halal slaughter; Jewish and Muslim leaders said the prohibition of ritual slaughter eroded religious freedom. In February, Minister of Health Thanos Plevris apologized to the Jewish community for “offensive views” he had expressed while a member of the Popular Orthodox Rally Party (LAOS). In March, President Katerina Sakellaropoulou and local officials participated in a march in Thessaloniki to commemorate Holocaust victims. In September, the Central Board of Jewish Communities (KIS) condemned the appointment of a Supreme Court vice

president, citing her antisemitic views. The country continued its presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) until March 1.

In May, the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) reported that 28 of the 72 incidents of discrimination and violence recorded in 2021 targeted migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or skin color, compared with 74 of 107 cases recorded in 2020. According to media reports, vandalism and arson of religious sites occurred sporadically, including fires at a church in Athens, a mosque, and a nongovernmental institute for Orthodox-related religious affairs; destruction of 40 ossuaries at an Orthodox cemetery in Athens; and defacement of icons at a small Greek Orthodox church in Xanthi during Easter. Media outlets reported that on December 29, unknown individuals vandalized a Holocaust memorial at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The memorial stands at the site of a Jewish cemetery the Nazis destroyed in 1942. Urban graffiti featured antisemitic elements, such as swastikas and the word “Nazi.”

During the year, the U.S. Ambassador, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, and other U.S. embassy and consulate general personnel met with a range of government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and the preservation of religious cultural heritage. Embassy officials raised specific topics, such as the ability of minority religious communities to exercise their right to religious freedom, including the practice of ritual animal slaughter, and the need to prevent antisemitism and Holocaust denial with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Education and Religious Affairs, including with the general secretary for religious affairs, and members of the Jewish and Muslim communities. The embassy cosponsored various conferences and webinars on Holocaust legacy issues and religious freedom and sent 10 teachers to the United States for a program on Holocaust education.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.5 million (midyear 2022). According to research polls, 81 to 90 percent of the population identifies as Greek Orthodox, 4 to 15 percent as atheist, and 2 percent as Muslim.

Approximately 140,000 Muslims, including Alevi Muslims, live in Thrace; they are largely descendants of the officially recognized Muslim Minority according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. This group includes individuals of Turkish, Pomak (Slavs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire and whose language is a mix of Bulgarian, Greek, and Turkish), and Roma origin. According to the Pew Research Center, an additional 520,000 Muslims – mostly asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants – live in the country; half live in Athens.

Members of other religious communities that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Old Calendarist Orthodox, Catholics (mostly Roman Catholics and smaller numbers of Eastern Rite Catholics), Protestants, including Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of polytheistic Hellenic religions, Scientologists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Independent and media sources estimate Ethiopian Orthodox number 2,500 and Assyrians fewer than 1,000. According to the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop, approximately 100,000 Armenian Orthodox live in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution recognizes Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion.” It states freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship with some restrictions. The constitution prohibits “proselytizing,” defined as “any direct or indirect attempt to intrude on the religious beliefs of a person of a different religious persuasion with the aim of undermining those beliefs.” This prohibition is rarely enforced. The constitution prohibits worship disturbing public order or “offending moral principles.” It allows prosecutors to seize publications that “offend Christianity” or other “known religions,” which are defined as groups with at least one valid permit to operate a place of prayer or worship.

The law provides up to two years in prison for maliciously attempting to prevent or disrupt a religious gathering or for engaging in “insulting action” inside a place of worship. A 2019 amendment to the penal code abolishes articles criminalizing

malicious blasphemy and religious insults. The constitution states public education should support “the development of religious conscience among citizens.” Greek Orthodox priests and government-appointed muftis and imams receive salaries from the government.

The constitution states that ministers of all known religions are subject to the same regulations as Greek Orthodox clergy. It states individuals are not exempt from compliance with the law because of religious conviction.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish Community of Greece, and Muslim Minority of Thrace have long-held status as official, religious, public-law legal entities. The Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Rite Catholic Church, Anglican Church, two evangelical Christian groups (the Evangelical Church of German-speakers and the Greek Evangelical Church), and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian Apostolic, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches acquired religious legal-entity status under a 2014 law, which outlines how additional entities can acquire such status. This application process requires documents proving the group has “open rituals and no secret doctrines,” a list of 300 signatory members, a qualified leader who is legally in the country, and proof (e.g., each group’s charter of association) the entity’s practices do not threaten public order. Under the law, all religious officials of known religions and official religious legal entities, including the Greek Orthodox Church, the muftiates of Thrace, and the Jewish Community of Greece, must register with the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

The law provides an alternate method to obtain government recognition: a group with at least one valid permit to operate a place of worship acquires legal protection as a “known religion” and has benefits that include exemption from taxes and municipal fees for property used solely for religious purposes. The terms “houses or places of prayer or worship” are used interchangeably; it is at the discretion of a religious group to determine its term of preference. Membership requirements for house of prayer permits differ from the requirements for official recognition of religious legal entities. Local urban planning departments must certify facilities meet minimum safety standards. Once a house of worship receives the required approvals, the religious group must submit a description of its basic principles and rituals and a biography of the religious minister or leader to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for final approval. The application for a house of prayer or worship permit requires

at least five signatory group members. The leaders of a religious group applying for a house of prayer permit must be Greek citizens, EU nationals, or legal residents of the country and must possess other professional qualifications, including relevant education and experience. A separate permit is required for each physical location.

A religious group qualifying as a religious legal entity may transfer property and administer houses of prayer or worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Alternatively, some groups have opted to retain their status as civil society nonprofit associations acquired through court recognition prior to the 2014 law. Under this status, religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahai's, may operate houses of prayer and benefit from real estate property tax exemptions, but they may face administrative and fiscal difficulties in transferring property and in operating private schools, charitable institutions, and other nonprofit entities. Although properties that recognized religious groups use exclusively for religious purposes are tax exempt, nonreligious properties owned by these groups are subject to taxation.

The law allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne accords the recognized Muslim Minority of Thrace the right to administer and maintain mosques and social and charitable organizations. A law passed in August amends the process by which official, government-appointed muftis are selected in Thrace, increasing the number of members from 10 to 33 in an advisory committee of local Muslim leaders to select candidates and placing a caretaker mufti, instead of a prefect, at the center of the decision-making process. The new expanded advisory committee consists of the acting mufti as president, 27 members decided by a public drawing, and five Muslim theologians nominated by the acting mufti. Seven of the 27 members decided by the drawing must have taught Quran or Islamic law courses for at least two years, 10 must be imams from the vacant muftiate, and 10 must be Quran teachers. All applications are submitted to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and then referred to the acting mufti. The acting mufti and advisory committee are responsible for drafting a list of candidates. The minister of education and religious affairs chooses among the candidates, and the final

appointment is made by presidential decree (as is also the case for Greek Orthodox metropolitans).

The new law on the appointment of muftis also requires candidates be citizens younger than 62 and members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace. A candidate must also hold a university degree in Islamic Studies plus have five years of experience as an imam or Quran teacher or must have graduated from an Islamic religious school in Thrace and have 10 years of experience as an imam or Quran teacher. The advisory committee assesses candidates' character, theological knowledge, and history of religious activity. According to the same law, a mufti can be dismissed by presidential decree in case of conviction for certain crimes, including hate crimes and domestic violence; extended illness or incapacity; conviction for accepting money to perform a religious service; or behavior incompatible with sharia. The law also stipulates a mufti must not openly side with or against any political party; have other work; run for the local or regional elections (as applies for all religious leaders); or be appointed as a cabinet member, deputy minister, secretary general, or special secretary. The same law secures Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs funds for the daily operation of the muftiates and for care of retired muftis.

A 2018 law mandates that official muftis must obtain notarized consent from all parties who wish to adjudicate a family matter (marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony, or inheritance) based on sharia. Absent such consent, family matters fall under civil court jurisdiction. Sharia decisions are subject to ratification by first instance (trial) courts.

The law provides for optional Islamic instruction in public schools in Thrace and optional Catholic instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros. The law makes it easier to hire and retain instructors for such courses.

The law establishes an individual's right to choose his or her burial or cremation location and mandates death certificates detail this information. In the presence of a notary, individuals may designate their preferences and designate a person to carry out funeral preferences.

Homeschooling is generally not permitted. The law requires all children to attend 11 years of education in state or private schools, including two years of preschool

education (ages four to six). Religious instruction, largely Greek Orthodox, is required in primary grades three through six and secondary grades seven through nine. Students who continue in high school also receive religious instruction in grades 9-12 as part of the official curriculum. Non-Orthodox students may be exempted from religious instruction with a parent's or guardian's submission of a document citing religious consciousness grounds. Exempted students may attend classes with alternate subject matter.

By law, any educational facility with fewer than nine students must temporarily suspend operations, with students referred to neighboring schools.

According to the law, parents may send their children to private religious schools; Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish schools operate in the country. As per the Lausanne Treaty, the government operates bilingual (Greek/Turkish) secular schools in Thrace. Their number varies according to the number of registered students, with a minimum of nine per school. There are two Islamic religious schools in Thrace for grades seven to 12. Muslim students in Thrace wishing to study the Quran may attend after-hours religious classes in mosques with teachers paid by the Turkish consulate in Komotini. Bilingual schools in Thrace observe Islamic holidays in addition to official state holidays.

The law allows Muslim students at all grade levels to be absent for two days each for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

The law states at least 0.5 percent of admissions to universities and technical institutes as well as civil service and public sector positions be allocated to the Muslim Minority of Thrace; 2 percent of slots in the national fire brigade school and academy are allocated to the Muslim Minority of Thrace.

The law allows conscientious objectors to serve 15 months of alternative service in municipal or public service in lieu of the 12-month mandatory military service for men. The law provides financial support and employment protections for conscientious objectors.

Individuals or legal entities convicted of incitement to violence, discrimination, or hatred based on religion may be sentenced to up to three years in prison and fined up to €20,000 (\$21,400). Religious motivation for a crime is a special

circumstance that can add up to three years to a sentence and double fines. Approval, trivialization, or malicious denial of the Holocaust or “crimes of Nazism” are illegal if they lead to incitement of violence or are threatening or abusive. The law prohibits individuals convicted of specific felonies, including those committed by imprisoned leaders of the Golden Dawn Party, from holding senior party positions, such as president, secretary general, or legal representative, during their sentence. Parties led by convicted felons cannot buy advertisements on radio or television during an election campaign.

Since 1945, the country has had private property restitution legislation providing for the return of all properties originally belonging to Jews and ordering the immediate return of Jewish property by the trustees to the original owners. Communal property has been returned to the Jewish Community of Greece under the same set of laws.

All civil servants, including cabinet and parliament members, must take an oath before entering office; individuals may take a religious or secular oath. The law bars leaders of known religions, including Orthodox priests, from running for mayor or city counselor. Religious symbols may not be used as emblems of candidates for mayor or city council.

A law passed in July standardizes the employment status and funding of Greek Orthodox clergy. The new provisions do not increase the state budget but bring all salaried Greek Orthodox clergy under a common funding stream and budget line.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On May 13, a court sentenced “in absentia” a defrocked monk known as “Father Kleomenis” for inciting violence against Jews in 2017, following a complaint filed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and a public prosecutor’s separate ex-officio intervention. An Athens court sentenced Kleomenis to one year in prison (suspended for three years) and a €5,000 (\$5,300) fine.

According to press reports, on February 15, an Athens court sentenced two GHM members to 12 months in prison (suspended for three years) after finding them guilty of “falsely accusing” Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus of racist and antisemitic hate speech in 2017. The defendants appealed the verdict, which they described as “representative of the institutionalized antisemitism in Greece.” The appeal was pending at year’s end.

On March 28, a Thessaloniki appeals court acquitted Ahmet Mete, the then unofficial mufti of Xanthi, on charges of inciting hatred and violence. A trial court had sentenced Mete to 15 months in prison (suspended for three years) for publicly stating in 2016 that he wished the leader of the minority Friendship, Equality, and Peace Party in Thrace would become the “Denktash of Thrace,” referring to Rauf Denktash, the former leader of the Turkish Cypriots in the northern part of Cyprus.

Some religious groups and human rights organizations, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to advocate equity between the 15 months of mandatory alternative service required of conscientious objectors and the 12 months of mandatory military service required of others in accordance with a Ministry of Defense decree. Despite an appeal filed by conscientious objectors in June 2020, the Council of State, the country’s top administrative court, had not rendered a decision by year’s end.

During the year, one religious group continued to seek acquisition of a house of prayer permit. In 2021, a self-declared ethnic Macedonian practicing an unaffiliated version of Orthodox Christianity that is not officially recognized by any other Orthodox Church filed a report to the Greek ombudsman, stating that he along with four additional applicants had been trying to obtain a permit for a house of prayer since 2017. On May 18, the ombudsman sent an official inquiry to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs regarding this case. On July 14, the ministry said the permit application was missing parts of the required documentation. The applicant said the government was deliberately delaying the process. Groups lacking religious-entity status and without a house of prayer permit, including Scientologists and ISKCON, continued to function as registered, nonprofit civil society organizations. The government did not legally recognize weddings conducted by these organizations, requiring their members to pursue a civil wedding or partnership.

On July 20, parliament passed legislation defining the government-funded Athens Mosque in the district of Votanikos as the religious center of Muslims in wider Athens (Attica Region). The law entrusted the Athens Mosque Managing Committee with advising the government regarding Islam. The law also provided funding for a five-member religious committee with a consultative status to the Athens Mosque Managing Committee.

Government-appointed acting muftis continued to lead all three muftiates in Thrace. Some Turkish-speaking members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace continued to object to the government's practice of appointing muftis, pressing instead for direct election of muftis by the community. The government continued to state that the appointments were appropriate because muftis serve a judicial function, and the constitution requires judges be appointed rather than elected and because the government allows muftis to practice sharia as it pertains to family and inheritance matters, with the notarized consent of all parties. Some members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace stated the government used these limited judicial powers as an excuse for ignoring citizens' calls for direct elections.

Parallel to these three official acting muftis, two unofficial muftis (elected by some male members of the Muslim community) also continued to provide religious services in Thrace. The government recognized neither these unofficial muftis nor their services. On September 12, a reported 7,000 members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace elected Mustafa Trampa to succeed the late unofficial mufti of Xanthi, Ahmet Mete, through a show of hands inside local mosques. On September 26, Imam Ahmet, the president of the Panhellenic Association of Pomaks (a group which, along with Turkish-speaking and Roma Muslims, forms part of the official Muslim Minority of Thrace), published an open letter in which he stated this unofficial voting process was corrupt. He noted that the process by which the two candidates were decided was unclear; the vote was not secret; there were no ballots or vote counting; and individuals voted without being present. Other critics said the elections were also unfair because women could not vote.

Throughout the year, the government granted permits for the establishment of six new houses of prayer operated by a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in Alimos, Athens; an Old Calendarist group in Liosia, Athens; and four Pentecostal groups, of which two were in Athens, one in Thessaloniki, and one in Sparti. The

government revoked the permits of five houses of prayer, four operated by Pentecostals and one by a Muslim group. In four of these cases, the request was filed by the group that had initially established the house of prayer. In one case, authorities suspended the permit because they found no place of worship at the given address. On June 19, the government inaugurated the first Alevi cemevi in Evros, near the Greek-Turkish border. The Secretary General of Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, George Kalantzis, helped cut the ribbon for the new cemevi. In remarks, he said, "Today, we are all here, Muslims and Christians. What has brought us here today? Our common love for God." In addition to the secretary general, several members of parliament attended the inauguration.

Media outlets reported that on March 16, the municipality of Avdira in Thrace broke ground on an amusement park in a municipal field that proved to be the site of a 17th-century Muslim cemetery. The mayor stated he did not know the old cemetery existed, saying the municipality had owned the property for more than 50 years. Media outlets published photographs of construction workers unearthing tombstones. Minister Kalantzis issued a statement calling the destruction of cemeteries "an action that hurts all people regardless of religious beliefs, as respect for the dead is not negotiated, and respect for the Muslim brothers of Thrace is not negotiable either." Two Muslim members of parliament from Xanthi, Thrace, appealed to the prosecutor to press charges against those responsible. The municipal government suspended indefinitely the park project.

NGOs and advocacy groups reported no significant progress during the year on resolution of Holocaust-era Jewish property claims, including by foreign citizens. Several Holocaust-era property claims remained open through year's end. The Organization for the Relief and Rehabilitation of Jews in Greece (OPAIE), a public-law entity, said more than 100 properties owned by Jews before the war had become government facilities. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of OPAIE regarding one of the property cases. A committee of government appointees and representatives of KIS that the government established in 2019 to negotiate the fate of the remaining properties met several times during the year but made no decisions regarding specific properties.

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki continued to press the Russian government to return its prewar archives. In December 2021, KIS said Prime

Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had convinced Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin to return the archives, but that Russia's invasion of Ukraine stalled any action on the case. The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki also continued to request the return of religious artifacts taken by Nazi occupiers in 1941 that are housed at the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw.

Some members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace continued to object to the government's role in appointing persons to oversee financial matters related to the Islamic Community Trust (*waqf*). They said the community should elect such persons in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty, rather than having committee members imposed by the government.

Muslim leaders continued to state that the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside Thrace obliged Muslims to transport their dead to Thrace for Islamic burials. Government officials said faith-based groups cannot manage cemeteries, except for those Islamic cemeteries in Thrace dating to the Ottoman era. Muslim leaders said it was against Islamic law for municipalities to continue the practice of exhuming bodies after three years due to space constraints. On May 5, Muslims in Athens gave a press conference lamenting the absence of an Islamic cemetery in the city, citing the case of a five-year-old Syrian refugee who was buried in Athens following a fatal road accident, despite requests from her parents to transport the remains to the Islamic cemetery in Thrace for burial. The family's lawyer said the Orthodox Church of Greece had granted property for the purpose, but bureaucratic hurdles had slowed the effort.

On September 23, the government passed legislation expanding the value added tax exemption on goods and services offered by national and foreign legal entities or individuals, including the Federal Republic of Germany, to the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki for the purpose of building the Holocaust Museum of Greece. According to the law, in the event of such donations, the contract is approved by a decree of the Ministry of Finance.

The government did not allow slaughter of animals without prestunning. In October 2021, the Council of State ruled that a ministerial decree issued in 2017 allowing the ritual killing of animals during Islamic and Jewish ceremonies without anesthesia was unlawful and contrary to the constitution and European and domestic legislation. On March 11, following pressure by animal rights groups,

the government withdrew a legislative amendment that would have allowed halal or kosher slaughter. Government officials said the amendment was withdrawn because it would not gather a majority vote in parliament. Jewish and Muslim leaders stated the prohibition of ritual animal slaughter eroded religious freedom, hurt local business, and increased the risk of unsafe private, in-house animal slaughtering. Imports of halal and kosher food were not affected by the prohibition.

In accordance with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, the government announced plans to operate 99 bilingual, secular primary schools in Thrace during the 2022-23 school year. The government also operated two bilingual, secular secondary schools, grades seven to 12, although these are not required under the treaty. The government closed four secular, minority primary schools and 29 mainstream primary schools in Thrace for the 2022-23 school year, citing low enrollment. Some minority representatives criticized the closures, contending religious minority schools should be exempted from enrollment minimums of nine students. Representatives of the Muslim Minority of Thrace said the existing schools were insufficient to meet their needs and that the government continued to ignore their requests to establish an additional religious minority secondary school and a private, bilingual preschool.

On July 7, the Council of State annulled a May 2021 ministerial decree determining the process by which students could be exempted from religious classes at schools. The court ruled that the decree should not have been issued without prior consultation with the Data Protection Authority. The court also ruled school principals should not have discretion over which subject matter exempted students would be taught, and that schools must establish alternate, equivalent classes for exempted students. The court reiterated a previous ruling that Greek Orthodox Christian students should attend religious classes in accordance with constitutional provisions. The ruling triggered public debate about how an exemption should be granted. Government officials said atheist and non-Orthodox students should be able to request an exemption by making a solemn declaration that they were not Orthodox Christian. Some human rights activists and members of opposition parties said a mere statement that a course was against one's conscience should be enough, citing a 2019 European Court of Human Rights decision finding a solemn declaration placed an undue burden on

parents to “disclose information from which it could be inferred that they and their children held, or did not hold, a specific religious belief.”

The government continued to provide direct support to the Greek Orthodox Church, including funding clergy salaries, estimated at €200 million (\$213.7 million) annually; religious and vocational training of clergy; and religious instruction in schools. According to Greek Orthodox and government officials, the government provided support in accordance with a series of legal agreements made by past governments and as compensation for religious property expropriated by the state. The government also provided direct support to the three muftiates in Thrace, including salaries for the three official muftis and for teachers contracted to teach an optional class on Islam in local public schools. The government also paid the salaries of the imam and two assistant imams of the Athens Mosque and the salaries of Catholic teachers at the state schools of Tinos and Syros islands.

On July 20, the government extended from nine to 10 months the employment contracts of Quran teachers in Thrace to ensure schools were properly staffed during Islamic holidays. Imams said they were in favor of the change.

The government continued to fund a Chair of Jewish Studies at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki and Holocaust education training for teachers. Government-funded educational trips for students, including to the Auschwitz concentration camp, remained suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs continued to promote IHRA-consistent Holocaust education in schools. On February 3, the ministry cosigned a Memorandum of Understanding with the Shoah Memorial in France, the Jewish Museum of Greece, and the Mohammed Ali Research Center, to educate teachers, students, and civil society actors about the Holocaust and other genocides.

On September 20, Antonis Alakiotis, the founder of the first and only crematorium in the country, said the government discriminated against those who wished not to comply with the Orthodox practice and tradition of burial. Alakiotis said requiring death certificates be withheld until a close relative of a cremated person signed a written statement attesting the person wished to be

cremated was a discriminatory practice because there was no such requirement for close relatives of those choosing burial.

On February 13, Minister of Health Plevris apologized to the Jewish community for “offensive views” he had expressed while a member of the LAOS party. Plevris stated he “categorically condemns antisemitism” and “Holocaust revisionism” and had distanced himself from his father, Konstantinos Plevris, who authored a book that referred to the Holocaust as “a fairy tale.” The Minister acknowledged that he “grew up in an environment with a strong antisemitic influence.” On October 11, Minister Plevris condemned his father’s having given the Nazi salute in court while defending Yannis Lagos, a convicted member of the former neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. He said, “There were two terrifying missteps here which made me shudder: the first is that the salute took place in a courtroom; and the second ... that the salute took place before a mother, Magda Fyssa, whose son was murdered by a neo-Nazi.” On October 14, the public prosecutor launched an investigation of Konstantinos Plevris’s use of a Nazi salute, and the Athens Bar Association summoned him to a disciplinary hearing. By the end of the year, Konstantinos Plevris had given two more Nazi salutes in court.

On September 2, KIS condemned the August appointment of Marianthi Pagouteli as a Supreme Court vice president. In 2007, Pagouteli wrote a minority opinion at the trial of Holocaust-denier Konstantinos Plevris, in which, according to KIS, she rationalized Plevris’ views and recommending acquittal. Members of the Jewish community denounced Pagouteli in 2013 for having an internet blog in which she denied the Holocaust, compared Zionists to Nazis, and said she wished that Nazi leader Adolf Hitler would have “eradicated” all Jews. On September 6, Pagouteli issued a statement insisting she had only expressed a legal opinion, which she said was also shared by higher courts. In a letter to KIS, Pagouteli reaffirmed her respect for freedom of religion, especially with respect to the Jewish people.

On January 27, the municipality of Thessaloniki, in collaboration with the mayor, regional governor, the IHRA, and Jewish leaders, began cleaning memorial metal plaques and stones outside a high school to commemorate the 149 Jewish students whose education was cut short when Nazis deported them to concentration camps in 1943. Of those students, only six survived the Holocaust.

Media outlets reported that on February 20, the municipality of Xanthi and the Cultural and Development Center of Thrace, in collaboration with KIS, unveiled a Holocaust Memorial in honor of the 526 Jews of Xanthi who perished during the Holocaust. The rabbi of Thessaloniki presided over the unveiling, at which several government officials spoke, including the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs and the president of the Greek Presidency of the IHRA.

On January 27, Prime Minister Mitsotakis marked Holocaust Remembrance Day, stating, “We do not forget our compatriots and all the Jews who perished in Auschwitz and the camps of horror. Let International Holocaust Remembrance Day be a beacon on the way of our everyday action against racism and antisemitism.” The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued a circular to schools suggesting a two-hour program of Holocaust-related educational activities be held annually on January 27. Regional governments and local Jewish communities organized remembrance events in Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa, Volos, Trikala, Ioannina, Chalkida, Kavala, and Chania.

On March 20, President Sakellariopoulou, Vice President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas, the Israeli Ambassador, local officials, and an estimated 2,000 other persons participated in a march in Thessaloniki to commemorate Holocaust victims. During the event, President Sakellariopoulou laid flowers on the steps of the train which carried the first 2,800 Jews from Thessaloniki to the extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In her address, she called empathy and the preservation of historical memory the only way to “equip ourselves against a new onslaught of evil.”

On April 28, to mark the annual Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement commemorating the millions of lives lost in the Holocaust, renewing “the pledge to never forget,” and emphasizing the importance of countering denial and antisemitism through education.

The country held the IHRA presidency until March 1. The presidency’s central theme was, “Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust: Education for a World without Genocide Ever Again,” supplemented by the theme of “Combating Holocaust Denial and Distortion on the Internet.” Authorities held a closing event entitled, “The Holocaust, Genocides, and Mass Atrocities: Remembering the Past

to Safeguard the Future” in Kalamata, Peloponnese. The government held an additional event in October in Ioannina on preventing antisemitism online.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to the RVRN, which is coordinated by UNHCR and the Greek National Commission for Human Rights and is composed of 52 NGOs, 28 of the 72 incidents of discrimination and violence recorded in 2021, the most recent year reported, targeted migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or skin color, compared with 74 of 107 cases in 2020. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely or primarily based on religious identity. In two of the 72 incidents, the targets were Jewish sacred sites, including a cemetery in Ioannina.

In the same report, the RVRN stated that police received 18 reports of violence potentially sparked by religion, compared with 31 in 2020.

On January 2, unknown perpetrators set fire to 10 gas canisters outside the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Paul in Athens, causing minor damage. On January 23, unknown individuals placed an incendiary device outside an unofficial mosque in the Patisia area of Athens, causing damage but no injuries. Police opened investigations of both attacks but made no arrests by year’s end.

On January 27, unknown individuals dispersed antisemitic leaflets signed by “Apollonios” in Thessaloniki’s Eleftherias Square, the site where the expulsion and extermination of the local Jewish population began in 1942. The leaflets stated that Israel’s Mossad had killed the late Archbishop Christodoulos, who died of cancer in 2008, and called for the square to be named after him.

According to media reports, on February 8, three individuals set fire to the nongovernmental Institute for National and Religious Affairs in Thessaloniki, damaging the building facade. On February 11, police arrested three alleged members of the Organization for Anarchist Action group in connection with the fire.

According to news reports, on November 7, unknown perpetrators vandalized and damaged 40 ossuaries at an Orthodox cemetery in Nikaia, near the port of

Piraeus. Media outlets reported the perpetrators stole valuables from several of the ossuaries. Police opened an investigation, which continued through the end of year.

On December 29, unknown individuals vandalized a Holocaust memorial on the campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The memorial stands at the site of a Jewish cemetery the Nazis destroyed in 1942. The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki condemned the vandalism, calling the memorial an important reminder of the historic, centuries-old Jewish cemetery. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the mayor of Thessaloniki Konstantinos Zervas, Minister of Education Niki Kerameus, Secretary General for Religious Affairs Kalantzis, the rector of the university, the main opposition political party SYRIZA, and other political parties, such as Hellenic Solution, also released statements condemning the vandalism. On December 30, university staff removed the graffiti.

In April, a poll of a representative sample of the adult population by Athens-based research and policy think tank diaNEOsis, conducted through telephone interviews and an online panel, found approximately 46 percent of respondents endorsed the view that the phrase “Jewish people” “represents something good” and approximately 32 percent said it meant “something bad.”

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador, other embassy and consulate general representatives, and officials from the U.S. Department of State, including the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues who visited the country in February, met with a range of government and civil society leaders to discuss religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, combating antisemitism and Holocaust denial and distortion, and the establishment of a Holocaust Memorial Museum in Thessaloniki. Government interlocutors included Deputy Prime Minister Panagiotis Pikrammenos; Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Dendias; Ambassador George Polydorakis, Greek Chairman of the IHRA; Civil Governor for Mount Athos Athanasios Martinos; Education and Religious Affairs Minister Kerameus; and Secretary General for Religious Affairs Kalantzis.

Embassy officials also held discussions on religious freedom with local and regional government officials, such as the mayors of Thessaloniki and Ioannina.

Work with the Office of the Prime Minister and with the Minister of Culture on a project involving the retrieval of personal items belonging to Jewish refugees from the 1946 *Athina* shipwreck off Astypalea Island continued throughout the year. Some of the retrieved objects will be displayed in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition.

Embassy officials met with the primates of the Orthodox Church, including the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Archbishop of the Church of America, and several metropolitans. Senior embassy officials and the Consul General in Thessaloniki met with representatives of the Jewish Communities of Greece, members of the Muslim Minority of Thrace, including official muftis in Thrace, Muslim members of the Athens Mosque in Votanikos, members of the Church of Scientology, and others to promote interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and respect for diversity. U.S. officials discussed the ability of minority religious communities to exercise their rights to religious freedom, including performing ritual animal slaughter, government initiatives affecting the Muslim Minority of Thrace and Muslim immigrants, the operation of the first public mosque in Athens, government action regarding the planned Holocaust Memorial Museum and Educational Center of Greece on Human Rights in Thessaloniki, initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue, and possible joint action in addressing antisemitism.

The embassy and consulate general officials monitored the ability of minority religious groups to freely practice their religion and the extent of societal discrimination, including physical violence and verbal harassment against members of minority religious groups, and they expressed concern to government officials, including to Secretary General for Religious Affairs Kalantzis, about antisemitic and anti-Muslim acts and rhetoric.

In collaboration with the Secretariat for Religious Affairs, the Diocese of Messinia, and the Fulbright Foundation in Greece, the embassy co-organized an international conference, "Holocaust, Genocides, and Mass Atrocities: Remembering the Past to Safeguard the Future." The conference took place in Kalamata, Peloponnese, from February 25 to 27, and was the closing event for the country's IHRA presidency. Speakers and attendees from the United States included the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and officials of the U.S. Holocaust

Memorial Museum and the World Jewish Restitution Organization. In early May, the embassy sponsored a five-day program, "Faith-Based Leadership in a Turbulent World," in partnership with a U.S. university and the nongovernmental Athens Foreign Affairs Institute. Program participants included the leaders of the Orthodox Church of Greece, of Cyprus, and of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, as well as laypersons.

On April 25, also in the context of the country's presidency of the IHRA, the embassy cooperated with the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the U.S. Holocaust Museum and Memorial, and Yad Vashem to organize a webinar for 100 teachers, including from Greece and the United States, on IHRA best practices for teaching and learning about the Holocaust. The embassy cosponsored various conferences and webinars on Holocaust legacy issues and religious freedom. In May, the embassy sent 10 teachers to the United States for a Holocaust education program. The program focused on curriculum development and included sessions with education experts from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and other U.S. institutions.

The embassy and consulate general also promoted religious tolerance and the right of religious freedom on social media, emphasizing regularly that religious freedom is a U.S. government priority. The Ambassador publicly condemned the December 29 vandalism of the Holocaust memorial at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. Following his visit to the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, the Ambassador tweeted, "I was moved by my visit to the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki and meeting with President Saltiel to learn more about Thessaloniki's Jewish past and plans for the Holocaust Museum of Greece, a reminder for us all of the lives lost and our need to stand united against antisemitism."